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THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN CHECHNYA

ISSUE

The human rights situation in Chechnya remains a cause for serious concern. More than a year after Russian forces entered Chechnya, with the death toll approaching 30,000, conflict continues and a durable political settlement is nowhere in sight.

BACKGROUND

On December 11, 1994, some 40,000 Russian troops poured into Chechnya, a predominantly Muslim republic of 1.3 million in the Transcaucasus, in a bid to crush the independence movement launched by President Jokhar Dudayev in the fall of 1991. The Kremlin seems to have anticipated that a quick surgical strike against Dudayev would be popular in Russia, where Chechens are widely associated with mafia activity. On the eve of the invasion, Defence Minister Grachev boasted that his forces could take the Chechen capital, Grozny, in two hours.

In the event, the operation has proved to be a military, public relations, and human rights disaster, dragging on for more than a year at a cost of tens of thousands of lives. Recent official estimates place the death toll at 2,500 federal forces, 10,000 Chechen fighters, and 13,500 civilians. The number of refugees in the region, while down substantially from the 400,000 recorded at the height of military operations last spring, is still much more than local authorities can manage. Last month's fierce fighting in Gudermes, Chechnya's second largest city, has added an estimated 25,000 refugees to the total.

Flagrant human rights violations have been reported on both sides. Last April, federal forces were accused of massacring as many as 200 residents of the town of Samashky west of Grozny. Male Chechens have been routinely arrested and detained under deplorable conditions without legal recourse. The rebels have been resorting to acts of terrorism, seizing over 1,000 largely civilian hostages in the southern Russian city of Budennovsk last June, and a further 3,000 in the transcaucasian republic of Dagestan earlier this month. The bloody resolution of this latest crisis, in which Russian special forces levelled the Dagestani village of Pervomaiskoe with scant regard for loss of life, has resulted in international expressions of concern and the resignation of Yeltsin's human right commissioner, Sergei Kovalev.

An OSCE Assistance Group was deployed to Grozny in the spring with a mandate to work to promote respect for human rights and establish facts concerning their violation, facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance, provide assistance with regard to the return of refugees, and promote the peaceful resolution of the crisis. An uneasy ceasefire was brokered under OSCE auspices at the end of July, but sporadic clashes continued and tensions mounted steadily in the run-up to the December 17 elections, which Dudayev and his well-armed supporters denounced as a provocative attempt to legitimize Moscow's rule.